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Open Futures: An enquiry- and skills- based educational programme developed for primary education and its use in tertiary education.

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Abstract
Open Futures is a transforming enquiry-based and skills-based system for education that is central to the curriculum, linking learning and life. It was developed to help children discover and develop practical skills, personal interests and values, which will contribute to their education and help to enhance their adult lives. Open Futures works in partnership with groups of schools in local clusters to develop a bespoke training programme, which extends the existing curriculum and nurtures independent learning through pupil-led approaches to personal learning. Schools benefit from the experience, knowledge and support of like-minded education professionals locally, nationally and internationally. Working with schools and their communities in the UK and India, Open Futures has been running with widespread success for 9 years. It now reaches more than 30,000 children in the UK. There is a body of independent evidence from primary and secondary education showing that both individual strands, as well as the complete Open Futures programme, significantly improve learner outcomes. We now wished to move Open Futures into the tertiary education sector. It was felt that an Open Futures approach to learning and teaching, particularly involving *askit*, would be beneficial to the community of learners at Central Bedfordshire Further Education College, rated Grade 2 by Ofsted in October 2013. Training has been in three areas so far: Construction, Public Services and Pathways (i.e. Learners with learning difficulties and disabilities). In all cases, there were significant positive impacts for learners and for teachers. As experience with Open Futures develops in the College, it should become clear how such a central enquiry-based and skills-based approach will help learners, and provide evidence for the use of Open Futures in tertiary education that could be used in other tertiary educational institutions.

Keywords: pedagogy, research, culture, creativity, inspiration, secondary, skills

Introduction

Open Futures (see: www.openfutures.com) is a transforming enquiry-based and skills-based system for education that is central to the curriculum, linking learning and life. It was developed to help children discover and develop practical skills, personal interests and values, which will contribute to their education and help to enhance their adult lives.

In 2004 the Helen Hamlyn Trust (HHT) decided to develop an integrated education programme for Primary Schools to reach children at the earliest stages of their education, to improve engagement and aspirations thus improving outcomes. In 2005/6 Open Futures was initiated by the Helen Hamlyn Trust, and began a pilot scheme as *growit cookit*, with the Royal Horticultural Society and the RSA Focus on Food Campaign, working together in 10 schools along the south coast. In 2006/7 *filmit* and *askit* were added to the Open Futures programme. In collaboration with the interaction designer, artist, teacher and creative director of fabrica (http://www.fabrica.it), the late Andy Cameron *filmit* was developed by HHT, and *askit* was developed with SAPERE to put enquiry at the

heart of the school curriculum and specifically to underpin learning in the context of a skills-based approach.(see: http://www.sapere.org.uk/).

How does it work?
Open Futures works in partnership with groups of schools in local clusters to develop a bespoke training programme, which extends the existing curriculum and nurtures independent learning.
Schools benefit from the experience, knowledge and support of like-minded education professionals locally, nationally and internationally. The curriculum team of professional advisors work with head teachers and their leadership team to scope the implementation of the Open Futures programme as a key driver to achieve their school improvement plans.

Open Futures provides high quality training for teachers in the four discrete learning strands which are meaningful to children:

- *askit:* Through *askit* pupils of all ages develop and use personal, critical-thinking and problem solving skills.
- *growit*: Through *growit* pupils develop horticultural skills and also apply practical, number, scientific, team-work and other skills.
- *cookit*: Learners develop and use the practical skills of food preparation, and also apply personal skills including choosing a healthy diet.
- *filmit*: Through *filmit* learners work in teams to explore, shape and articulate their ideas through the process of digital filmmaking. Films are shared with schools globally through the unique and secure *'filmit'* website platform.

These linked creative contexts stimulate and motivate, providing children and their teachers with the opportunity to work with professionals who are experienced in delivering educational projects from the worlds of food, horticulture, media, academia, philosophy and the arts. Together they open pathways for pupils to follow, a deeper and more practical commitment to developing their skills for a future that seems ever less certain. With its focus on two of the most basic and perennial of human skills – gardening (growit) and cooking (cookit) – and another two of the most subtle and significant of human skills –reviewing (filmit) and enquiring (askit), it presents an alternative model of a curriculum: a genuine enquiry-and-skills-based curriculum. Much of the national curriculum can, in fact, be 'covered' by extending from these four skills/strands.

Working with schools and their communities in the UK and India, Open Futures has been running with widespread success for 9 years (or since 2005). It now reaches more than 30,000 children in the UK. Fig. 1 shows Open Futures Centres of Excellence in the UK, with numbers of schools arranged in clusters around Hull, Wakefield, Manchester, Birmingham, Newham, and the South East.

Fig. 1. Open Futures UK Centres of Excellence. Numbers of centres of excellence in the locations indicated.

Evidence for the success of Open Futures

There is a body of independent evidence showing that both individual strands, as well as the complete Open Futures programme, significantly improve learner outcomes (c.f. Boaler, 2008). Research into the effectiveness of *Philosophy for Children* (*P4C*) has demonstrated repeatedly the positive impacts it has on pupils learning and attainment. For example, in a randomised controlled trial study into the impact of P4C in primary and secondary schools, Topping and Trickey (2007) showed significant pre-post cognitive ability gains. The study provided evidence of maintained cognitive gains from collaborative philosophical enquiry, transferred across contexts.

In an independent study in 2013, researchers from the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Newcastle questioned 38 teachers at schools taking part in the Open Futures pilot project, who responded to evaluation questions about the impact that the Open Futures Programme had on their class. They were asked to give their responses on a five-point scale, where 1=No impact and 5=Very strong impact. Their results are summarised in Table 1, and show that the teachers felt strongly the important impact that Open Futures had on the skills development for their learners as well as their motivation and confidence.

'Other projects and enthusiasms come and go, but Open Futures tends to be sustained: changes are evident in schools years after initial training, with the effects on the curriculum underpinned by changes to school planning, budgeting and physical space.' Professor David Leat, Executive Director at The Research Centre for Learning & Teaching, Newcastle University 2013

Table 1. Response of teachers (n=38) in primary schools who adopted Open Futures to the impact of Open Futures in relation to key skills of their learners.

SKILL	RESPONSE
Numeracy	**Nearly 70%** (68.5%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **moderate to very strong positive impact** on the **numeracy** outcomes for pupils in their class.
Writing Skills	**Over 84%** (84.3%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **moderate to very strong positive impact** on the **writing skills** of pupils in their class.
Science	**Over 85%** (86.4%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **moderate to very strong positive impact** on the **science** outcomes for pupils in their class.
Technology	**Over 60%** (61.1%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **moderate to very strong positive impact** on the **technology** outcomes for pupils in their class.
Speaking and Listening	**Over 70%** (71.1%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **strong to very strong positive impact** on the **speaking and listening outcomes** for pupils in their class, while over 94% (94.8%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a moderate to very strong positive impact on the speaking and listening outcomes for pupils in their class.
Emotional	**Over 80%** (81.9%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **moderate to very strong positive** impact on the **emotional outcomes** for their class.
Motivation	**Over 65%** (67.5%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **strong to very strong positive impact** on the **motivation** of pupils in their class, while over 95% (97.2%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a moderate to very strong positive impact on the motivation of pupils in their class.
Self Confidence	**Over 70%** (71.0%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **strong to very strong positive impact** on the **self-confidence** of pupils in their class, while over 95% (97.3%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a moderate to very strong positive impact on the self-confidence of pupils in their class.
Life Skills	**Over 75%** (76.3%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a **strong to very strong positive impact** on the **life skills** of pupils in their class, while 100% (100.0%) of teachers responding to the survey question reported that Open Futures had a moderate to very strong positive impact on the life skills of pupils in their class.

Open Futures at Central Bedfordshire Further Education College

Central Bedfordshire Further Education (FE) College is a general FE College of c. 6,000 learners and a turnover of c. £13 million. The college has four campuses across Central Bedfordshire, based in Dunstable, Houghton Regis, Luton and Leighton Buzzard. The college offers a range of courses, full-time and part-time, vocational and academic, from further education to higher education. The vocational curriculum includes Engineering, Construction, Hospitality & Catering, Digital Media, Sport, and Hairdressing and Holistic Therapies. Students study vocationally-orientated skills-based subjects that relate directly to their lives and careers beyond the college. The College was rated Grade 2 (Good) in a recent 2013 visit, and in its journey to Grade 1 (Outstanding), it was felt that an Open futures approach to learning and teaching, particularly involving *askit in the context of their essentially skills- based curriculum*, would be beneficial to the community of learners as well as to the College as a whole.

An initial series of meetings with key Open Futures staff resulted in an action plan for College staff training, which will involve a total of eight cohorts of staff in a variety of disciplines. The College is training its staff in the Open Futures *askit* module as an enquiry-based approach to the

development of students' life skills and vocational skills, which will complement its existing skills-based approach to vocational education.

The application of Open Futures techniques to the teaching of vocational subjects/skills could be a very valuable area of development and further study. To-date, we have only worked on *askit*.

Experience to date
Training has been completed in three areas so far: Construction, Public Services and Pathways (i.e. Learners with learning difficulties and disabilities).

- In Construction, the *askit* approach was shaped through the tutorial programme by one 17 year old learner who said in a tutorial lesson on progression opportunities '*There's no point in talking about aspirations, if you're from round here, you're doomed*'. The student was referring to a local area of deprivation where he grew up, which is characterised by unemployment and low aspirations. This led to a philosophical discussion on whether people's futures are socially constructed or whether the learners could take responsibility for their own futures and direct them. The teacher was then able to change the focus of her lesson and of her assessment strategy, so that students left the lesson believing they were able to direct their own futures, and with concrete ideas for their next steps.

- In Public Services, learners wanted to take part in a philosophical discussion, but wanted to write their own questions. They rejected the original question from the teacher ('*If a person walks into a shop and reads a comic, then puts it back, is that stealing?*'), and put forward a variety of their own questions, which they then discussed avidly.

In a relationship, is it wrong to flirt?
If someone drops £120, would you keep it?
Is using animals for testing wrong?

The students found the discussions thought-providing and helpful to them in considering the moral dilemmas associated with the kinds of jobs they will go on to do in organisations such as the Police and Armed Forces.

- Pathways. This was with an Entry level 1 group – learners who have profound and multiple learning difficulties and/or disabilities. An important element of the students' programme is learning to deal with situations and problems when there are no straightforward yes/no or right/wrong answers. Discussion and shades of grey represent significant challenges for the students. The askit approach, using stimuli including pictures and questions, allowed them to think about the following topics for the first time:

Would you rather…?
Would you dare…?

The initial response from teachers who have taught Open Futures *askit* sessions is that the approach is a valuable tool in developing students as independent learners. Ask It has generated high levels of student involvement and engagement in learning, and students have taken this involvement and engagement into other sessions and activities.

Next steps

The College is training all staff who work directly with learners in *askit* Level 1. This includes Teachers, Assessors, Learning Support Assistants, and Learning Mentors, 170 members of staff in total. It is seen by the College as a vital part of the College's approach to developing a culture of learning. Moving from primary pedagogies to secondary and tertiary pedagogies raises many issues, but Open Futures is a sufficiently flexible programme to be able to cope with them in the future. Specifically for further education, and Central Bedfordshire College in particular, a number of questions are important, not least the following:

- Can philosophical enquiry be applied to all curriculum areas?
- Is it just a teaching technique teachers draw on when an opportunity occurs?
- Should the College plan askit sessions in Schemes of Work?
- Should the College tell students in Induction about askit - that they will take part in philosophical enquiry routinely on their course?
- Should the College make it clear to students when they take part in philosophical enquiry sessions?

As experience with Open Futures develops in the College, it should become clear how such an enquiry-based and skills-based approach will help learners, and provide evidence for the use of Open Futures in tertiary education that could be used in other tertiary educational institutions.

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